

# Faith, Law, & Grace

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We read in Romans 3:28, in the New International Version of the Bible (the NIV), that the apostle Paul wrote this to the believers in Rome:

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

But later on, we read in James 2:24 of the same translation:

“You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”

The first of these Scriptures separates faith from law, and the second one unites them. How do we reconcile these apparently contradictory statements made by two major Apostles? I believe that Dr. David Stern does it very well in his Jewish New Testament<sup>1</sup> translation of Romans 3:20 which states:

“For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, because what *Torah* really does is show people how sinful they are.”

And in Stern’s translation of Romans 3:28 we read:

“Therefore, we hold the view that a person comes to be considered righteous by God on the ground of trusting, which has nothing to do with legalistic observance of *Torah* commands.”

Not being a scholar of Biblical Greek, I cannot certify that Dr. Stern is accurate in translating the Greek word νόμου (*nom’-os*) as “legalistic observance of *Torah*.” However, it makes good sense, and his distinction between what is “law” and what is “legalistic” not only reconciles the apparent contradiction in this case and this translation, but in other cases and other translations of *nom’os* as well, where the English seems to pit God’s law against His grace. The difference between what is “law” and what is “legalism,” is that “law” infers a correct application of a legal requirement, whereas “legalism” is strict adherence to the letter of a statute while ignoring its spirit and intent. Legalistic interpretation often leads to error, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. David H. Stern’s Jewish New Testament is now incorporated into his larger work, The Complete Jewish Bible.

simplest way for us to avoid such error is, whenever we encounter a reference to the word “law” in Paul’s writings, we should consider the possibility that a better translation is “legalistic” or “legalism.” It is not always the case, but it is, often enough.

Now, why am I making such a point of this in a *Shabbat* message? It is because mistranslations of Scriptures dealing with faith, law, and grace, are often at the core of why some Christians believe that Messianic Judaism has rejected God’s grace and has put itself back under the Law. They are wrong, of course, but it is a serious problem in our relating to our Christian brothers and sisters. Our attention to the application of God’s law in the New Covenant is what makes us distinctive within the wider body of believers (Christians) who, in many cases, do not understand that their faith in Yeshua is related to the same law for which they criticize us. Let me illustrate the problem with something posted on the Internet, on “Christian Forums:”

“For a while now, I’ve heard about the Messianic Judaism denomination. Apparently, they reject many of the traditions of the Christian church, sometimes including the Trinity. They also teach that people should obey the Torah in order to be saved. Most disturbingly, I’ve even heard stories of people becoming so engrossed in Messianic Judaism that they simply convert to Orthodox Judaism and reject Jesus altogether. What do you guys think? Is this just a harmless case of Christians dressing up as Jews? Or should we suggest that these people return to traditional Christianity?”

At the root of this misinformation, is the kind of faulty translation of Paul’s writings to which I have previously alluded. Sooner or later, each of us here will be asked by someone – a friend, a colleague – to defend our position on faith, law, and grace, and I believe that the Holy Spirit has moved me to guide you in understanding the true meaning and intent of Paul in order to prepare you for it. The way I propose to do that is by comparing how the NIV and the Jewish New Testament translate several of Paul’s difficult sayings, keeping in mind that the NIV is only representative of, and similar to, many other modern translations, and that Stern’s rendering is not always the best either. Stern is, to his credit, unique among other translators by his use of the term “legalism,” where the NIV and most other translations render the Greek word “*nom’os*” as “law.” This throws a different light on Paul’s sayings that is sometimes quite helpful, but it does not always result in a fair rendering of the Greek. In those cases, Stern is more of an interpreter than a translator, but his renderings of the Scripture and illumination of

Paul are, nevertheless, useful. So, with that caveat in mind, let us explore Paul's teachings on faith, law, and grace.

We will begin with Romans 3:20, that in the NIV reads:

“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

The NIV is correct in saying that mere observance of law does not make a person righteous. If I stop my car at a red light merely because it is the law – it makes me obedient to the law (which is good), but it does not make me righteous. Righteousness requires that I obey the law and stop at red lights, but any righteous reason for doing so would have to include my concern for the safety of others; merely wanting to comply with the letter of the law is not enough to make me righteous. The problem with the NIV translation of Romans 3:20 is that it can lead one to think that there is no merit in keeping God's Law. Stern's translation avoids the possibility of any such misunderstanding by stating:

“For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, because what *Torah* really does is show people how sinful they are.”

The next Scripture, Romans 6:14, in the NIV reads:

“For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

The NIV translation gives the impression that, because of Yeshua, God's grace exempts us from being subject to His law. One does not have to be a theologian or a Bible translator to realize that such a notion is wrong on its face. If my small child disobeys me (i.e. breaks the law I gave him as his father), I am gracious to forgive him, but he is going to get his rear end tanned if he does it again. One of the problems with the NIV is its unwise translation of the Greek word ὑπὸ (*hoop-o*) as “under,” in the expression “under law.” In English, the word “under” has two meanings. One of its meanings – the wrong one if applied to this Scripture – is “subject to.” By Paul saying that we are not under law, he does not mean that we are not subject to law. *Hoop-o* does indeed mean “under,” but in the sense of being “underneath.” Therefore, what Paul means is that we are “not underneath” the law, as being weighed down or crushed by it.

In an attempt to avoid such a misunderstanding, Stern's Jewish New Testament translates Romans 6:14:

“For sin will not have authority over you; because you are not under legalism but under grace.”

Stern does not address the word *hoop-o'*, and his translation stretches the concept of legalism a bit too far; still, it is not bad in that it avoids treating law as a negative.

The next Scripture we will discuss is Romans 7:6; in the NIV it reads:

“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”

This way of translating reads as though we have been released from having to obey God's law, which is tantamount to saying that we no longer have to obey God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that all Scripture is inspired and is useful for many things, but the NIV seems to say that we now no longer even have to read the Scriptures of the *Torah* because the Spirit is going to tell us what to do. Stern's translation of Romans 7:6 is much better; it reads:

“But now we have been released from this aspect of the *Torah*, because we have died to that which had us in its clutches, so that we are serving in the new way provided by the Spirit and not in the old way of outwardly following the letter of the law.”

Stern's fifty-two words to explain Paul is quite a bit more than the twenty words of the Greek, but he is essentially correct.

Moving along, Romans 10:4 in the NIV reads:

“Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

The NIV translation is ambiguous as to the meaning of the expression “end of.” “End of” has several meanings, one of them being that what is referred to (in this case “the law”) has ceased to exist. Since the Law of God and the Will of God are

synonymous, we know that that cannot be true, and so Stern corrects it by translating “end of” as “goal” and he translates Romans 10:4:

“For the goal at which the *Torah* aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts.”

I apologize for the length of this list, but there are several more Scriptures to go. 1 Corinthians 9:20 in the NIV reads:

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.”

Once more, we encounter the Greek word *hoop-o*’ translated “under.” I dealt with this in a prior verse so I will not repeat myself here. Suffice it to say that, according to the NIV, Paul seems to be saying that he is not subject to God’s Law, which we know he would never say. Once more, Stern uses many more words in his translation than are in the Greek, in order to properly convey the meaning of 1 Corinthians 9:20. Stern’s translation reads:

“That is, with Jews, what I did was put myself in the position of a Jew, in order to win Jews. With people in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the *Torah*, I put myself in the position of someone under such legalism, in order to win those under this legalism, even though I myself am not in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the *Torah*.”

Now, turning to the Book of Galatians: Galatians contains four Scriptures that are problematic in the way that the NIV renders them. The first of these, Galatians 2:21, reads:

“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Well, this is really not bad, except that it infers that obedience to God’s law has nothing to do with one’s righteousness. Here, I do not like Stern’s use of “legalism;” his translation reads:

“I do not reject God's gracious gift; for if the way in which one attains righteousness is through legalism, then the Messiah's death was pointless.”

In my opinion, the NIV's translation of *nom-os*' as "law" is better, because all that one needs to understand is that one does not become righteous through ritualistic obedience. One becomes righteous through faith – not the other way around – and when a person is righteous, he or she wants to obey God's Law.

The next Scripture: Galatians 3:10-12 in the NIV reads:

“All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them.”"

The "curse" that is mentioned here is a reference to Deuteronomy 27:26 that reads in the NIV:

“Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!”

When Paul wrote what is recorded in Galatians 3:10-12, he was referencing the Mosaic Covenant, under which an Israelite's justification was so dependent on literal obedience to the Law, that anyone who failed to observe even the least of its statutes was cursed. But Paul wrote what he did centuries later, at a time of transition when the New Covenant had already come, but the Temple's sacrificial system was still operative. Paul was saying to the Jewish believers in Galatia: “Continue to obey the Law by performing the sacrifices, but no longer rely on them for your justification; instead, rely on your faith in Messiah Yeshua.”

As correct as Paul was, some Christians quote translations (including the NIV in Galatians 3:12) that say that the Law is not based on faith. They do this, in order to be able to say that anyone (Messianic Jews in mind) who tries to keep any part of the Mosaic Law is abrogating his or her faith in Yeshua. The Jewish New Testament remedies the translational problem of portraying the law as bad, but oh how many words Stern uses in order to do it. Stern's translation reads:

“For everyone who depends on legalistic observance of *Torah* commands lives under a curse, since it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not keep on doing everything written in the Scroll of the *Torah*." Now it is evident that no one comes to be declared righteous by God through legalism, since "The person who is righteous will attain life by trusting and being faithful." Furthermore,

legalism is not based on trusting and being faithful, but on [a misuse of] the text that says, "Anyone who does these things will attain life through them." The Messiah redeemed us from the curse pronounced in the *Torah* by becoming cursed on our behalf; for the *Tanakh* says, "Everyone who hangs from a stake comes under a curse.""

Two more Scriptures to go: Galatians 5:4 in the NIV reads:

"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."

The problem with translating in this way is that justification by faith (of which the Scripture approves) "is" justification by law – New Covenant law – the law of faith. Stern's translation is better; it reads:

"You who are trying to be declared righteous by God through legalism have severed yourselves from the Messiah! You have fallen away from God's grace!"

Here too, it is not necessary for Stern to change terminology from "law" to "legalism," but what he says is, nevertheless, correct.

Finally, Galatians 5:18 in the NIV states:

"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. "

Again, an unwise translation of the Greek word *hoop-o'* that leads one to improperly conclude that, if one is led by the Holy Spirit one is not subject to God's law. Well, I hope that by this time the thought of such a thing doesn't ring true, and that I do not have to remind you that, in the New Covenant, we are no longer talking about statutes of law (as under Moses), but rather about the will of God which is, in fact, His Law. Stern's translation correctly states:

"But if you are led by the Spirit, then you are not in subjection to the system that results from perverting the *Torah* into legalism."

Here again though, Stern's switch from "law" to "legalism" is not needed for us to correctly understand what Paul is saying.

Earlier in this message I read to you an inquiry concerning Messianic Judaism that appeared on “Christian Forums.” I am going to read it to you again, and this time I will answer it; the inquiry reads:

“For a while now, I've heard about the Messianic Judaism denomination. Apparently, they reject many of the traditions of the Christian church, sometimes including the Trinity. They also teach that people should obey the Torah in order to be saved. Most disturbingly, I've even heard stories of people becoming so engrossed in Messianic Judaism that they simply convert to Orthodox Judaism and reject Jesus altogether. What do you guys think? Is this just a harmless case of Christians dressing up as Jews? Or should we suggest that these people return to traditional Christianity?”

Here is my answer to it:

“Dear Forum inquirer:

I have been heavily involved in Messianic Judaism for the last thirty-nine years and can tell you from personal experience that Messianic Jews and Gentiles that join us do not reject the Trinity; we completely buy into the biblical truth that God exists as the Father, His Son Jesus (we call him by his Hebrew name “Yeshua”), and the Holy Spirit.

We do not reject evangelical Christian traditions as being wrong, but we choose to not observe some of them for cultural reasons. We, derive our religious practices from those that are commanded (or at least exemplified) in Scripture, as well as from Jewish tradition, so long as the tradition does not conflict. So, for example, we do not celebrate Christmas in the way that Christians do, but we seriously and reverently study the Scriptures that tell of Yeshua’s birth. Likewise, we do not celebrate Yeshua’s resurrection on the day that Christians call Easter; instead, we celebrate his resurrection in connection with Passover and the Day of Firstfruits according to the biblical sequence of events. One Christian tradition that we do follow is taking the bread and wine of communion, and, in my congregation, we pray the Lord’s Prayer every Sabbath. Of course, many of our practices are culturally Jewish, such as praying traditional prayers in Hebrew, and reading Hebrew Scriptures from a handwritten *Torah* scroll of parchment.

We Messianic Jews and the Gentiles that join us do not seek to obey the *Torah* in order to be saved. Our view of salvation is no doubt the same as yours,



which is that it comes through repenting, and receiving Yeshua as Messiah (i.e. Lord and Savior). The fact is, that no one today can keep the commandments of *Torah* literally in the same way as the Israelites who lived during the time of Moses; we do not have the Temple, or a functioning Levitical priesthood, or animal sacrifices. Nevertheless, we are confident that all Scripture is inspired by God, and is valuable for teaching, convicting of sin, correcting our faults, and training in right living (we know that from 2 Timothy 3:16-17), and we therefore look to the Holy Spirit for guidance as to the Scripture's application.

Regrettably, there "have" been occasions where persons connected to Messianic Judaism initially confessed Yeshua and later disavowed him and either joined or returned to a traditional synagogue. They are few and far between – not unlike those who confess Jesus within the Church, and later disavow him and join heretical cults or return to secular unbelief."

Well, what do you think? Did I answer our inquirer adequately? I hope so, and I thank the Holy Spirit for giving me this message.